



Identifying Mentors For Nontraditional Students

What Is a Mentor?

A mentor is an adult who assumes the role as advisor and role model for individuals who are not family members. They differ from teachers and counselors because they are not acting solely as professional helpers. A mentor may act as a tutor one day, a sponsor the next day by helping the student find a job, and as a confidant who offers support during or after a family crisis.

When considering who an appropriate mentor would be for a nontraditional student, the instructor should match students with mentors who are the same gender as the student and who work in the nontraditional occupation that the student is considering as their career choice. This will help students identify with individuals who took risks to pursue a nontraditional path. If available, it will also help if mentors are from the same ethnic background such as Hispanic, Asian, Caucasian, etc., to show students that they can succeed in the workplace.

What Are the Characteristics of a Good Mentor?

To be a successful mentor, the individual must possess special qualities, including the following:

- Likes kids, genuinely interested in the student's well being
- Skilled worker capable of communicating knowledge to others
- Patient and realistic in expectations; does not set unreachable goals
- Good listening skills; takes time to hear what a student says, and responds in an honest caring manner
- Encourages, rather than criticizes; has a positive outlook
- Helps students learn to look at options and work through problems
- Reliable, dependable, good work ethics (role model)

What Are the Qualifications of an Ideal Mentor?

Jobs for the Future suggests the following qualifications in its *School-to-Work Toolkit*:

- Four to six years experience in the business/industry
- Knowledge of School-to-Work concepts
- World-class technical and complementary skills
- Capacity to be both a specialist and a generalist
- Outstanding teaching and advising skills with the ability to create an effective learning environment
- Work ethic that is respected by peers
- Willingness to support their community
- Psychological and behavioral maturity
- Demonstrated interest and capabilities in training young workers
- Demonstrated pride in occupation and job skills

What are Basic Mentor Responsibilities?

Often, the hours demanded for training and consultation with program staff members (instructor, coordinator, counselor) make it easy to understand why finding mentors can be difficult. Although responsibilities will vary depending on the commitment of the mentor, some of them may be:

- Instruct the student, help them perfect skills they already have, and teach them new ones
- Diagnose problems and difficulties the student has and recommend corrective action
- Provide support, encouragement, and direction
- Provide practice opportunities for a variety of jobs/tasks
- Review student performance daily, offer feedback, and verify the progress of learning in the workplace
- Keep open lines of communication with the instructor, school counselor, or School-to-Work coordinator
- Be alert to personal problems which may interfere with schooling or work and seek help from appropriate sources for the student; for example, a student who is being excluded or being harassed as a result of their nontraditional career choice

The best way to find mentors for nontraditional students is by approaching business and industry leaders who serve on program advisory committees and support and hire nontraditional workers. Make contacts and set up a file of potential mentors for students in your school or program, so that a suitable match can be found when students are ready for a mentoring experience.